UNIT ON APARTHEID
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND
SECURITY COUNCIL AFFAIRS

ST/PSCA/SER.A/5

THE SHARPEVILLE INCIDENT AND ITS INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Paper prepared by the Rt. Reverend Ambrose Reeves, former Bishop of Johannesburg, at the request of the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa

UNITED NATIONS, New York, 1968

NOTE

The Unit on Apartheid was established in the Secretariat of the United Nations, in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 2144 A (XXI) of 26 October 1966, "to deal exclusively with policies of apartheid, in consultation with the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, in order that maximum publicity may be given to the evils of those policies". Among the functions of the Unit is the preparation of special studies on apartheid.

This paper on the Sharpeville incident and its international significance has been prepared at the request of the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa by the Rt. Reverend Ambrose Reeves, who was Bishop of Johannesburg when the incident occurred on 21 March 1960. It is published in this series at the request of the Special Committee.

It may be recalled that, by resolution 2142 (XXI) of 26 October 1966, the General Assembly proclaimed 21 March as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and that this date was chosen as it was the date of the Sharpeville incident.

The Special Committee felt that this account of the incident should be published in order to promote the commemoration of the International Day.

/...

History records that on 13 May 1902 the treaty which ended the Anglo-Boer war was signed at Vereeniging, then a small town some thirty miles from Johannesburg. Nobody could then have realized that some fifty-eight years later the whole world would learn of another event occurring in that part of the Transvaal; this time in the African township of Sharpeville. As with most towns on the Reef, as the white population of Vereeniging grew so did the townships for Africans on the outskirts of the town. It is somewhat ironical that the outrage that was perpetrated at Sharpeville should have occurred at a place which had already earned a high reputation for African housing. Eleven years earlier the authors of the Handbook of Race Relations in South Africa had noted that "recently Vereeniging instituted its own building department and is making speedy progress in the erection of houses at the new Sharpe Native Township in which it is designed to build 3,165 houses at a total cost of £1,219,216. Although the Smit Report recommended that work of a fairly straightforward type should be undertaken by the local authority, Natives working under the supervision of experienced European foremen, other local authorities have not acted on this recommendation to any considerable extent. They are probably not prepared to risk incurring the displeasure of European trade unions". (page 251)

Yet in spite of the fact that the white local authority in Vereeniging was one of the first municipalities in South Africa to provide better housing for Africans, it was the events at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960, which shocked the world and which are still remembered with shame by civilized men everywhere. Early that morning a crowd of Africans estimated at between 5,000 and 7,000 marched through Sharpeville to the municipal offices at the entrance to the township. It appears that much earlier that day members of the Pan Africanist Congress had gone around Sharpeville waking up people and urging them to take part in this demonstration. Other members of the PAC prevented the bus drivers going on duty with the result that there were no buses to take the people to work in Vereeniging. Many of them set out on bicycles or on foot to their places of work, but some were met by Pan Africanists who threatened to burn their passes or "lay hands on them" if they did not turn back. However, many Africans joined the procession to the municipal offices quite willingly. Eventually this demonstration was dispersed by the police, using tear gas bombs and then a baton charge, some sixty police following them into the side streets. Stones were flung and one policeman was slightly injured. It was alleged

/...

that several shots were fired by Africans and that only then some policemen opened fire without an order from their officer to do so. Fortunately nobody was hurt.

I was not at Sharpeville when the shooting occurred but it was familiar territory to me. Time and again I officiated at the large African Anglican church there and knew intimately many of the congregation, some of whom were to be involved in the events of that tragic day. I could so well visualize the scene. Near my home in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg was a large zoo situated in acres of parkland. By a curious anomaly the lake near the zoo was the meeting place for Africans working in the northern suburbs on a Sunday afternoon. Work finished for the day they would leisurely make their way there in small groups - a gay, colourful, jostling crowd - families and individuals - some political, some not, chatting, laughing, singing, gesticulating and occasionally fighting. The thud of homemade drums could be heard shattering the Sunday calm, and over all the plaintive notes of the penny whistle - shrill and penetrating. It could so easily have been like that on that crisp autumn morning in Sharpeville. Like that, but so very different.

During the morning news spread through the township that a statement concerning passes would be made by an important person at the Police Station later that day. The result was that many who had been concerned in the earlier demonstration drifted to the Police Station where they waited patiently for the expected announcement. And all the time the crowd grew. Reading from the police report on what subsequently happened the Prime Minister told the House of Assembly that evening that the police estimated that 20,000 people were in that crowd. This seems to have been a serious exaggeration. From photographs taken at the time it is doubtful if there were ever more than 5,000 present at any particular moment, though it may well be that more than this number were involved at one time or another as people were coming and going throughout the morning. They were drawn to the crowd by a variety of reasons. Some wanted to protest against the pass laws: some were present because they had been coerced; some were there out of idle curiosity; some had heard that a statement would be made about passes.

But whatever may have brought them to the Police Station, I was unable to discover that any policeman ever tried either to find out why they were there or make any request for them to disperse. And this in spite of the fact that the presence of this crowd seems to have caused a good deal of alarm to the police. So much so that at ten o'clock that morning a squadron of aircraft dived low over

/...

the crowd, presumably to intimidate them and encourage them to disperse. This was surely a most expensive way of trying to disperse a crowd. The police claimed that the people in the crowd were shouting and brandishing weapons and the Prime Minister told the Assembly that the crowd was in a riotous and aggressive mood and stoned the police. There is no evidence to support this. On the contrary, while the crowd was noisy and excitable, singing and occasionally shouting slogans it was not a hostile crowd. Their purpose was not to fight the police but to show by their presence their hostility to the pass system, expecting that someone would make a statement about passes. Photographs taken that morning show clearly that this was no crowd spoiling for a fight with the police. Not only was the crowd unarmed, but a large proportion of those present were women and children. All through the morning no attack on the police was attempted. Even as late as one p.m. the Superintendent in charge of the township was able to walk through the crowd, being greeted by them in a friendly manner and chatting with some of them. Similarly, the drivers of two of the Saracen tanks stated subsequently that they had no difficulty in driving their vehicles into the grounds surrounding the Police Station. And their testimony was borne out by photographs taken of their progress.

As the hours passed the increasing number of people in the crowd was matched by police reinforcements. Earlier there had only been twelve policemen in the Police Station: six white and six non-white. But during the morning a series of reinforcements arrived until by lunch time there was a force of nearly 300 armed and uniformed men in addition to five Saracens. Yet in spite of the increased force that was then available, no one asked the crowd to disperse and no action was taken to arrange for the defence of the Police Station. The police just strolled around the compound with rifles slung over their shoulders, smoking and chatting with one another.

So the scene was set. Anyone who has lived in the Republic of South Africa knows how explosive that situation had already become. On the one side the ever-growing crowd of noisy Africans - the despised Natives - the Kaffirs who, at all costs, must be kept down lest they step outside the place allotted to them. On the other side the South African police. Every African fears them, whether they be traffic police, ordinary constables or members of the dreaded Special Branch. Most policemen expect unquestioning deference from Africans. If this is not

/...

forthcoming they immediately interpret it as riot and rebellion. In part this is due to the widespread prejudice of white people the world over to those who happen to have a different coloured skin than their own. But in South Africa it is underpinned by the hatred, fear and contempt that so many white police have for all non-white people.

The only action taken during that morning appears to have come not from the police but from two Pan Africanist leaders who urged the crowd to stay away from the fence around the perimeter of the compound so that they did not damage it. Then Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar arrived in the compound. He appears to have accepted that he had come into a dangerous situation and therefore made no attempt either to use methods of persuasion on the crowd or to attempt to discover what the crowd was waiting for. Instead, about a quarter of an hour after his arrival he gave the order for his men to fall in. A little later he said, "Load five rounds". But he said no more to any of his officers, or to the men. Later, Colonel Pienaar stated that he thought his order would frighten the crowd and that his men would understand that if they had to fire they would not fire more than five rounds. Unfortunately, this was not understood by the policemen under his command.

During this time Colonel Spengler, then head of the Special Branch, was arresting two of the leaders of the Pan Africanist Congress. Afterwards he arrested a third man. Colonel Spengler said subsequently that he was able to carry out his arrests because while the crowd was noisy it was not in a violent mood.

It is extremely difficult to know what happened next. Some of the crowd near the gate of the Police Station compound said later that they heard a shot. Some said that they heard a policeman say, "Fire". Others suddenly became aware that the police were firing in their midst. But all agreed that practically all of them turned and ran away once they realized what was happening. A few, it is true, stood their ground for some seconds, unable to understand that the police were not firing blanks. Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar was quite clear that he did not give the order to fire. Moreover, he declared that he would not have fired in that situation. It was stated later that two white policemen opened fire and that about fifty others followed suit, using service revolvers, rifles and sten guns.

But whatever doubts there may be of the sequence of events in those fateful minutes, there can be no argument over the devastating consequences of the action

/...

of the police on 21 March 1960 in Sharpeville. Sixty-nine people were killed, including eight women and ten children, and that of the 180 people who were wounded thirty-one were women and nineteen were children. According to the evidence of medical practitioners it is clear that the police continued firing after the people began to flee for while thirty shots had entered the wounded or killed from the front of their bodies no less than 155 bullets had entered the bodies of the injured and killed from their backs. All this happened in forty seconds, during which time 705 rounds were fired from revolvers and sten guns. But whatever weapons were used the massacre was horrible. Visiting the wounded the next day in Baragwaneth Hospital near Johannesburg, I discovered youngsters, women and elderly men among the injured. These could not be described as agitators by any stretch of the imagination. For the most part they were ordinary citizens who had merely gone to the Sharpeville Police Station to see what was going on. Talking with the wounded I found that everyone was stunned and mystified by what had taken place. They had certainly not expected that anything like this would happen. All agreed that there was no provocation for such savage action by the police. Indeed, they insisted that the political organizers who had called for the demonstration had constantly insisted that there should be no violence or fighting.

To make matters worse, some of the wounded with whom I spoke in hospital stated that they were taunted by the police as they lay on the ground, being told to get up and be off. Others who tried to help were told to mind their own business. At first there was only one African minister of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa who tried to help the wounded and the dying. It is true that later the police assisted in tending the wounded and summoned ambulances which conveyed the injured to Vereeniging and Baragwaneth Hospitals. Later, still 77 Africans were arrested in connexion with the Sharpeville demonstration in some cases while they were still in hospital. In fact, it was clear on my visits to the wards of Baragwaneth Hospital that many of the injured feared what would happen to them when they left hospital. This wasn't surprising, for Baragwaneth Hospital was an extraordinary sight. Outside each of the wards to which the wounded were taken were a number of African police, some white policemen, and members of the Special Branch in civilian clothes. The attitude of the South African Government to the events at Sharpeville can be seen from its reaction to the civil claims lodged the following September by 224 persons for damages amounting to around £400,000 arising from the

/...

Sharpeville killings. The following month the Minister of Justice announced that during the next parliamentary session the Government would introduce legislation to indemnify itself and its officials retrospectively against claims resulting from action taken during the disturbances earlier that year. This was done in the Indemnity Act No. 61 of 1961. Not that money could ever compensate adequately for the loss of a breadwinner to a family or make up for lost limbs or permanent incapacity. But it would have been some assistance. It is true that in February 1961 the Government set up a committee to examine the claims for compensation and to recommend the payment of ex gratia payments in deserving cases. But this is not the same thing, and in fact by October 1962 no payments had been made.

Few commentators since Sharpeville have attempted to justify the action of the police that day. In fact, many of them have drawn special attention to the complete failure of the police to attempt to communicate with the crowd at the Police Station. If it had been a white crowd the police would have tried to find out why they were there and what they wanted. Surely their failure to do so was due to the fact that it never occurred to them as the custodians of public order either to negotiate with the African leaders or to try to persuade the crowd to disperse. Their attitude was summed up by the statement of Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar that "the Native mentality does not allow them to gather for a peaceful demonstration. For them to gather means violence". The same point was demonstrated even more graphically by one of his answers at the Court of Enquiry under Mr. Justice Vessels. When he was asked if he had learnt any useful lesson from the events in Sharpeville he replied, "Well, we may get better equipment".

Not that all members of the South African Police Force are cruel or callous. No doubt many of them were shocked by what happened. At the same time what happened at Sharpeville emphasizes how far the police in South Africa are cut off from sympathy with or even understanding of Africans. And this is underlined by the fact that at no time did the police express regret for this tragic happening. Yet it would be folly to attempt to fasten the whole blame for the events at Sharpeville on the police. By the mass of repressive legislation which has been enacted every year since 1948, the South African Government has given the police a task which ever becomes more difficult to fulfil.

/...

It was this legislation which was indirectly responsible for the tragedy of Sharpeville, and in particular the "pass laws". Indeed, the immediate cause of many in the crowd assembling at the Police Station was the growing resentment of Africans to the system of passes. This system originated in 1760 in the Cape Colony to regulate the movement of slaves between the urban and the rural areas. The slaves had to carry passes from their masters. Subsequently, the system was extended in various forms to the whole country and was eventually collated in the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945. This Act made provision for a variety of passes including registered service contracts and for passes permitting men to seek for work in particular areas. But through the years an increasing number of Africans had been given exemption from these laws. This was the situation which obtained until 1952 when a new act ironically called "The Abolition of Passes Act" made it compulsory for every African male, whether he had previously had to carry passes or no, to carry a reference book. If the holder had previously been exempted from the pass laws he was now privileged to carry a reference book with a green instead of a brown cover! But the contents were identical. The advent of the reference books meant that technically there were no longer any such things as passes. But, as will be understood, to the Africans reference books are passes for they contain all the details which were previously entered on the various pass documents. They contain the holder's name, his tax receipt, his permit to be in an urban area and to seek work there, permits from the Labour Bureau, the signature each month of his employer to show that he is still in the employment he was given permission to take, as well as other particulars. Even more objectionable than having to possess a reference book is the fact that this book must be produced on demand to any policeman or any of the fifteen different classes of officials who may require to see it. Failure to produce it on demand constitutes an offence for which an African may be detained up to thirty days while inquiries are being made about him. What this means in practice can be seen from the fact that in the twelve months ending 30 June 1966 no less than 479,114 Africans were prosecuted for offences against the "pass laws". At the time of Sharpeville there were 1,000 prosecutions a day for these offences. By 1966, this had risen to over 1,300 a day. These figures speak for themselves.

/...

In 1960 a new development occurred when the Government of South Africa decided for the first time in South African history to extend the pass laws to African women. In their case another fear was added that they might be subjected to manhandling by the police with a further loss of human dignity. In fact, by the time of Sharpeville it was estimated that three quarters of African women were in possession of reference books. But many of the women who had not obtained reference books were strenuously opposed both to the pass system and to its extension to themselves. To them reference books stood for racial identification, and therefore for racial discrimination.

But this was by no means the only reason for unrest in Sharpeville. Anyone who knew the township at that time was aware that there had been increasing tension among the inhabitants because in that area wages were too low and rents were too high. Prior to March of that year rents had been increased in Sharpeville and this had added to the burdens of Africans living there. The previous year (1959) a study of the economic position of Africans in Johannesburg had shown that 80 per cent of Africans were living at or below the poverty datum line. The probability is that the lot of Africans in Sharpeville was worse than in Johannesburg. A survey carried out by the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department in 1962 in Soweto showed that 68 per cent of families there had an income below the estimated living costs. A subsequent study in 1966 showed that this figure remained the same. So in spite of the increaed prosperity of South Africa the economic position of a high percentage of Africans does not seem to have improved much since Sharpeville.

African wages in Sharpeville in 1960 were low, partly because African Trade Unions were not (and still are not) recognized for the purpose of bargaining with employers. But also, the continuing colour bar in commerce and industry meant, and still means, high minimum wages for white workers and low maximum wages for the black workers who make up the great majority of the labour force. All this means two wage structures in South Africa which have no relation to one another: in the fixing of the black wage structure the workers frequently have no say at all.

Several months before the tragic events at Sharpeville it was becoming obvious that those living in the township were facing an intolerable economic

situation. It is too easy to dismiss the Sharpeville demonstration at the Police Station as the work of agitators and the result of intimidation. All that those who led the demonstration did was to use a situation which, for political and economic reasons, was already highly explosive.

Not that Sharpeville was an isolated incident. The ten years before Sharpeville had seen feverish activity by the opponents of apartheid. By means of boycotts, mass demonstrations, strikes and protests, the non-white majority had attempted by non-violent means to compel those in power to modify their racist policies. For example, on 26 June 1952, the Campaign of Resistance to Unjust Laws had been launched. The same day three years later (26 June 1955) 3,000 delegates had adopted the Freedom Charter which had been drafted by the Congress Alliance. This took place at a massive gathering at Kliptown, Johannesburg. The following year (1956) the Federation of South African Women held a series of spectacular demonstrations against the extension of the pass system to African women. These culminated in a mass demonstration at the Union Buildings, Pretoria, on 9 August. Some 10,000 women gathered there in an orderly fashion to present 7,000 individually signed protest forms. Again, from 7 January 1957, many thousand African men and women for months walked eighteen to twenty miles a day to and from work in Johannesburg in a boycott of the buses. Although in this particular case they gained their objective, all the various endeavours by Africans to secure change by peaceful means brought little tangible result.

The surprising thing was that in all this activity there was very little violence on the part of boycotters, demonstrators and strikers. In spite of great and frequent provocation by the police, Africans remained orderly and disciplined. They were in truth non-violent. As could be expected there were, however, occasions when the resentment and frustration of Africans spilled over into violence. One such occasion was at Cato Manor near Durban, on 17 June 1959. On that day a demonstration of African women at the beer hall destroyed beer and drinking utensils and was dispersed by the police. Several days later the Director of the Bantu Administration Department met 2,000 women at the beer hall. Once they had stated their grievances they were ordered to disperse. When they failed to do so the police made a baton charge. General disorder and rioting followed, with the result that damage estimated at £100,000 was done to vehicles

/...

and buildings. Later that day Africans attacked a police picket and were driven off with sten guns. After this, things remained comparatively quiet in Cato Manor until a Sunday afternoon in February, 1960, when the smouldering resentment of Africans there again burst into flame. An ugly situation developed in which nine policemen lost their lives. This was a deplorable business. Whatever may be said of the actions of the South African police these men died while carrying out their duties. The blame for their deaths must in the first instance lie on those who murdered them.

The fact that these deaths occurred in Cato Manor only a few weeks before the demonstration at Sharpeville must have been well known to the police gathered at the Police Station in Sharpeville that morning. Certainly more than one spokesman of the South African Government linked these two affairs together. There is not the slightest evidence, however, that there was in this sense any connexion between the tragedies of Cato Manor and Sharpeville. But in another sense they were both intimately connected because more indirectly they both arose out of the action of those in power during the previous decade, who had taken every possible step to ensure that the whole life of the millions of Africans was encased within the strait-jacket of compulsory segregation.

Yet there the similarity ended. The crowd at Sharpeville was not attacking anything or anyone. Further, there is abundant evidence to show that they were unarmed. While nothing can justify the killing of police at Cato Manor, that incident cannot in any way exonerate the vicious action of the police at Sharpeville. As the late Sir Winston Churchill pointed out in a debate in the British House of Commons on 8 July 1920, "There is surely one general prohibition which we can make. I mean the prohibition against what is called 'frightfulness'. What I mean by frightfulness is the inflicting of great slaughter or massacre upon a particular crowd of people with the intention of terrorizing not merely the rest of the crowd, but the whole district or the whole country". This is precisely what the police did at Sharpeville. On that occasion Sir Winston concluded his speech with some words of Macaulay - "... and then was seen what we believe to be the most frightful of spectacles, the strength of civilization without mercy". These are words which aptly summarize all that happened at Sharpeville that March morning.

/...

Many people inside South Africa, though shocked for a time by the events at Sharpeville, ended by dismissing them as just one incident in the long and growing succession of disturbances that down the years have marked the implementation of apartheid. Certainly the Government of South Africa, though badly shaken in the days immediately following Sharpeville, soon regained control of the situation. On 24 March, the Government banned all public meetings in twenty-four magisterial districts. On 18 April, the Governor-General signed a proclamation (119) banning the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress as unlawful organizations, the result being that they were both driven underground. But neither of them became dormant. At the same time the Government mobilized the entire Citizen Force, the Permanent Force Reserve, the Citizen Force Reserve and the Reserve of Officers, and the whole of the Commando Force was placed on stand-by. Already on 30 March, in Proclamation No. 90, the Governor-General had declared a state of emergency which lasted until 31 August 1960. During that time a large number of prominent opponents of government policy of all races were arrested and detained without being brought to trial. In addition some 20,000 Africans were rounded up, many of whom were released after screening. So after some months eventually, at least superficially, life in South Africa became at least relatively normal. But underneath the external calm dangerous fires continue to smoulder: fires that can never be extinguished by repressive measures coupled with a constant and growing show offorce. Outside South Africa there were widespready reactions to Sharpeville in many countries which in many cases led to positive action against South Africa: action which still continues. But here, too, most people, even if they have heard of Sharpeville, have relegated what happened there to the archives of history, just one of the too many dark pages in the human story.

Yet it is my personal belief that history will recognize that Sharpeville marked a watershed in South African affairs. Until Sharpeville, violence for the most part had been used in South Africa by those who were committed to the maintenance of the economic and political domination of the white minority in the Republic. Down the years they had always been ready to use force to maintain the status quo whenever they judged it necessary to do so. When the occasion arose they did not hesitate to use it. Over and over again, non-white civilians were injured by police action or by assaults on them when in prison.

/...

Until Sharpeville the movements opposed to apartheid were pledged to a policy of non-violence. But on 21 March 1960, when an unarmed African crowd was confronted by 300 heavily armed police supported by five Saracen armoured vehicles, an agonizing reappraisal of the situation was inevitable. Small wonder is it that, having tried every peaceful method open to them to secure change without avail, the African leadership decided that violence was the only alternative left to them. Never again would they expose their people to another Sharpeville. As Nelson Mandela said in court at his trial in October, 1962, "Government violence can do only one thing and that is to breed counter-violence. We have warned repeatedly that the Government, by resorting continually to violence will breed in this country counter-violence among the people till ultimately, if there is no dawning of sanity on the part of the Government, the dispute between the Government and my people will finish up by being settled in violence and by force".

Outwardly things may go on in South Africa much as before. Visitors may find a booming economy, the white minority may seem secure in their privileged position for any foreseeable future, some urban Africans may have a higher living standard than formerly. But all this ought not to deceive anybody. The fact is that for the first time both sides in the racial struggle in South Africa are now committed to violence; the white minority to preserve the status quo; the non-white majority to change: change from a society dominated by apartheid to one that is non-racial in character. Already there are clear indications that the opponents of apartheid are turning deliberatly to violence. The fact that at the moment this is being expressed through small bands of guerrillas who may be neither very well trained nor well-equipped does not mean that they ought therefore to be dismissed as having little significance. After all, we have the examples of Algeria, Cuba and Viet-Nam before us as powerful reminders of what may result from very small and weak beginnings. In spite of the present calm in South Africa and a prosperity unparalleled in its history, within the Republic the seeds of violence have already been sown. Unless there is a radical change in the present political and economic structures of South Africa that which has already been sown will be harvested in a terrible and brutal civil war which might easily involve the whole African continent in conflict before it ends.

/...

Indeed it may be that in the present situation in the Republic of South Africa are hidden forces which will involve humanity in a global racial conflict unless the present racist policies there are changed radically. The choice before the international community has been a clear one ever since Sharpeville. Either it takes every possible step to secure the abandonment of the present policies in South Africa or the coming years will bring increasing sorrow and strife both for South Africa and for the world. Sharpeville was a tragedy showing most plainly that the ideology of apartheid is a way of death and not of life. Can the nations recognize this before it is too late?

June 1968

Litho in U.N.
17043-August 1968-5,000